

Mississippi John Hurt *Live* (Vanguard)
John Lee Hooker *Live At Newport* (Vanguard)

by Peter Stone Brown

Early in 1963, two blues collectors, Tom Hoskins and Richard Spottswood, pulled into a town in Mississippi that wasn't on the map, called Avalon. All they were going on was a 1928 recording. "Avalon Blues" by an obscure singer, **Mississippi John Hurt**. They were in luck. People at the general store gave them directions to Hurt's house. Hurt, a laborer hadn't recorded since 1928 and didn't even own a guitar. Hoskins had one however, and John Hurt could still play.

And so, for a little less than three years Mississippi John Hurt at age 71 became one of the most remarkable members of the '60s folk music scene.

Hurt had a fingerpicking style all his own. Part ragtime, part blues, totally melodic with a strong alternating bass, while the other fingers seemingly effortlessly picked a variant of the melody, no one will ever know where it came from. Within a year a lot of guitar players including Doc Watson would be trying to figure out what he was doing.

Hurt is usually referred to a blues singer, but like Leadbelly, his unique repertoire went far beyond blues making him more of a "songster." This is made abundantly clear on *Mississippi John Hurt Live* (Vanguard). Previously released as *The Best of Mississippi John Hurt*, this remastered version of an April '65 concert at Oberlin College with the addition of three previously unreleased tracks from the 1965 Newport Folk Festival finds Hurt singing more than a few gospel tunes as well as a truly delightful sing-along "You Are My Sunshine."

What sets Hurt apart from virtually every other blues singer is an uncommon gentleness and almost impish warmth that comes through in every song. Maria Muldaur used to call him "Mister Hippie John Hurt," and in his version of "Chicken" you get a very good clue why. In the sound of his voice, in his introductions to songs, you can feel how delighted he is at his change of fortune, and to be performing. And never is the feeling that it's entertainer's shtick - it's totally natural and the man himself.

Hurt's blues however are intense and driving. "Avalon Blues," "Sliding Delta" "Monday Morning Blues" and (from Newport) "Trouble I've Had It All My Days" leave no doubt he has lived what he's singing about and his playing and singing throughout this disc has an astounding amount of energy.

This recording contains the Hurt tunes that quickly became classics, "My Creole Belle," "Richland Woman Blues," "Coffee Blues" (the song that gave The Lovin' Spoonful their name) with its comical introduction about Maxwell house, and his unique versions of "Candy Man," "Salty Dog," "Stagolee" and "C.C. Rider."

One of the special things that about this album are the inclusion of the gospel tunes, opening with "Here Am I, Oh Lord Send Me," and "I Shall Not Be Moved." Standing out among these is an amazingly moving "Nearer My God To Thee."

While a couple of songs, especially the instrumental "Spanish Fandango" are marred by a very out of tune guitar, and while some blues purists will say nothing is better than the original 1928 Okeh recordings, we're lucky to have this glimpse of what John Hurt was like in concert.

Also just out on Vanguard is **John Lee Hooker** *Live At Newport* which contains four songs from the 1960 festival with the remaining 13 from 1963. This is kind of a strange recording because Hooker turned his electric way down almost making it sound like an acoustic.

I prefer Hooker solo because few bands or even other solo musicians could follow him or knew what to do. Hooker had his own sense of time and if he changed chords at all, he did it when he felt like it. On some of the tracks here, bassist Bill Lee accompanies him and there are times when you hear Lee holding back till he figures out Hooker's groove.

Despite the subdued guitar sound Hooker's singing is on the spookier side especially on "Tupelo" and "Great Fire of Natchez."

There are three previously unreleased tracks including alternate takes of "Boom Boom" (one acoustic, one electric), and "Hobo Blues" while the third song "You're Gonna Need Another Favor" features an extended bass solo from Lee. Oddly enough, on the acoustic "Boom Boom," Hooker gets his trademark boogie groove happening and his vocal truly takes off.

It's an interesting but strange album, probably because it was recorded at various sessions at the festival, probably a couple of blues "workshops" and possibly an evening concert. It never attains the feel or flow of a live set in a club. Occasionally the audience laughs at the strangest moments making the listener wonder what was going on on-stage. At other times, Hooker's between song comments are classic like when he says at the end of "I Can't Quit You Baby," "Thank you so much for the sound of your hands ringing in my ears."

While the good tracks are excellent, ultimately this one is for serious Hooker fans only.